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ABSTRACT

Needs assessment is the most commonly used procedure for assessing the worth of educational objectives. The authors believe this method is a survey of wants, rather than needs, of various groups. It does not establish that such wants ought to be fulfilled. It lacks a principled basis for carrying out its strategy. Four basic assumptions are made by proponents of needs assessment: institutions should fulfill needs of people, they should fulfill greater needs before lesser ones, people need from institutions what they want from them and are not getting, and people are in greatest need of what they want most. A procedure which considers preferences fails to provide principles which determine the wants to be fulfilled. The authors suggest ways of modifying the method of needs assessment. Four rules of universalizability are presented and explained. These would ensure that well reasoned, moral judgments would result from needs assessments. (DWH)

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STUDIES IN EVALUATION AND DECISION MAKING

Work Unit 3

Philosophic Inquiry into Evaluation

Frederick S. Ellett, Project Director

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Moral Reasoning, Needs Assessment and Universalizability

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(This deliverable is submitted in fulfillment of work proposed as "Report IV: Educational Evaluation and Ethical Considerations")

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF EVALUATION
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Moral Reasoning, Needs Assessments and Universalizability*

Introduction

Educational evaluators at both the state and local levels have often been asked to develop programs which would help students meet pre-specified objectives. They also have been asked to determine whether existing programs have succeeded in meeting their objectives. But evaluators rarely have been called upon to assist in the formation of educational objectives. As a result, some evaluators have come to see their task as one of determining the program's success (or failure), and do not see it as their task to formulate and defend the program's objectives.

Evaluation must investigate the worth of educational objectives if it is to benefit education. As long as we are unsure of the worth of a program's objectives, knowledge of that program's success or failure will be of little value. Many educators realize this and have begun to develop procedures which not only address program success, but also examine the worth of a program's objectives.

The most commonly used procedure for assessing the worth of educational objectives is the method called needs assessment. In Part A of this essay, we argue that:

(1) the method of needs assessment really amounts to a survey of the wants of various groups;

(2) the method does not establish that such wants ought to be fulfilled (see Ellett and Shumener, 1978); and

(3) the method of needs assessment lacks a principled basis for carrying out its strategy.

In Part B, we suggest ways of modifying the needs assessment method so that

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morally relevant considerations may be taken into account. We recommend that certain rules of universalizability become part of this method. Although judging in accordance with these rules does not guarantee that the resulting moral judgments will be correct, following them will deepen the awareness and understanding of all those involved in needs assessments.

Part A

Needs assessments have been popular for more than a decade now. Their popularity derives, in part, from the widely-shared belief that needs assessments perform an essential function in educational evaluation -- that they disclose the goals or programs that educational institutions ought to adopt. It is this belief about needs assessments that we question.

We have no quarrel with those who claim the job of educational evaluation is, among other things, to disclose the goals and procedures schools ought to adopt. They stake this claim on solid grounds. But the belief that needs assessment does a good job of educational evaluation is not well-grounded.

Proponents of needs assessments rely on four basic assumptions. The first is that institutions ought to fulfill the needs of people. The second, that institutions ought to fulfill greater needs before fulfilling lesser ones. The third assumption is that people need of institutions what they want from them and are not getting. And the fourth is that people are in greatest need of what they want most and are not getting.

Evaluators offer definitions of educational needs which are based upon these assumptions. According to W. James Popham, for example, an educational need is the discrepancy between what people want from education and what is actually taking place. He writes the following:

Desired Status of Learners	minus	Current Status of Learners	equals	An Educational Need

(1975, p. 65)

(See also Morris and Bank, 1977; Popham, 1975; Gagne and Briggs, 1974.)

Given these assumptions, it is clear what the evaluational strategy for disclosing goals is to be. To determine what institutions ought to do, i.e., to find out what people need of those institutions and how great the need is, one must discover what they want those institutions to do, how much they want the institutions to do those things, and the extent to which the institutions are doing those things.

Evaluators go to schools and communities and ask people what they want the schools to do. Then they ask the people to rank what they want the schools to do -- from what they want least to what they want most. After collecting this preference data, the evaluators determine the extent to which the schools are doing what people say they most want them to do.

In an earlier paper (Ellett and Shumener, 1978), we argued that some of the assumptions made by advocates of needs assessments are unjustified. The assumptions that needs ought to be fulfilled and that greater needs ought to be fulfilled before lesser needs have a great deal of plausibility. However, the assumption that needs are unfulfilled wants is mistaken and, therefore, so is the assumption that the greater the unfulfilled want the greater the need. In this paper, we will show that needs assessments are open to additional objections. To show that this is so, let us briefly consider the consequences of using needs assessments in two sorts of situations.

Suppose that the high school in a community lacks the large football stadium the community wants it to have. The high school also lacks class-

room facilities and textbooks for the speech and debate classes, and the community wants it to have these things too. Given the needs assessment assumption that educational needs exist to the extent that people want of educational institutions what they are not getting, we must conclude that there is an educational need for the football stadium as well as an educational need for the classroom facilities and textbooks.

Make one other supposition about the community -- that it prefers having a high school with a large football stadium to having the classroom facilities and textbooks required for the speech and debate classes. The needs assessment assumption that there is a greater educational need for what people want more of educational institutions and are not getting, forces us to draw the conclusion that the "educational" need for a large football stadium is greater than the educational need for the classroom facilities and textbooks. We are required to conclude that the high school ought to enlarge the stadium before constructing the classrooms and purchasing the textbooks.**

Nothing in the needs assessment procedure ensures that these constituents are well-informed of either the alternatives or their implications. To know whether the constituents were well-informed, one would have to know the reasons they had for ranking the alternatives as they did. The needs assessment procedure makes no room for the consideration of the reasons people have for preferring one thing to another.

**One troubling feature of cases such as this is that the constituents seem, in large part, to be dealing with matters which are peripheral to education. Matters which strike us as central to education -- learning, knowledge, understanding -- are not given priority. Nothing in needs assessment procedures ensure that matters of central importance to education will be considered. The lack of such safeguards is a sign that something has gone wrong in needs assessment procedures -- needs assessments provide no guarantee that people's wants will be considered on a principled basis.

As long as evaluators are ignorant of the reasons people have for their preferences, they cannot eliminate ill-reasoned or arbitrary suggestions. People may employ all sorts of reasons for the conclusions they draw, some of which may be based on false beliefs. As long as the evaluator is ignorant of these reasons, s/he cannot discount or correct preferences and conclusions stemming from false beliefs.

For example, some people may favor a large football stadium because they believe that college admissions officers would be more impressed by students who excel in football than by students who excel in speech and debate, and that a college education would ultimately give their students a better chance in the job market outside the community. Others may push for the football stadium because they believe that community life is stagnating, and that football would make the students feel more committed to their community than would speech and debate. In other words, the second group feels that the students already have too many reasons for leaving the community, and that an emphasis on football would instill in them a desire to live and work within the community.

These groups have incompatible goals. One group prefers the football stadium because it believes football is a better means of helping students succeed outside the community; the other group prefers the stadium because it believes football is a better means of keeping the students within the community. If one group is right, the other group is unknowingly defeating its purpose by giving the football stadium a higher priority. Suppose that college admissions officers actually give greater priority in admissions to students who excel in speech and debate than to students who excel in athletics. If so, the first group's preference for the football stadium stems from a false belief. Had they known this, they may have preferred

constructing classrooms and purchasing textbooks for the speech and debate classes.

This is one way in which the current needs assessment method breaks down. If the needs assessor has no access to the reasons on which people base their preferences and conclusions, he cannot be assured that the conclusions of needs assessments will not be based on false beliefs. Perhaps needs assessments could be revised so that preferences based on false beliefs are identified and the members of the community informed. Such a procedure would, among other things, involve examining the reasons people have for their preferences. However, even if it were possible to revise needs assessments in this way, needs assessments would still be open to other, more serious objections.

Suppose an evaluator finds that the schools in a community are fully integrated. Upon asking the community members what they want the schools to be like, however, the evaluator discovers that the community members want the schools to be racially segregated. Given the needs assessment assumption that an educational need exists to the extent that people need of an educational institution what they want from it and are not getting, it follows that there is an educational need for those schools to be racially segregated. An evaluator who uses needs assessment strategies in this situation is forced to conclude that fully integrated schools ought to be racially segregated, but people may be morally and legally obligated to keep the schools integrated.

The possibility that needs assessments could yield such a conclusion shows that something is wrong. Needs assessments identify wants, but they employ no principles for determining which, if any, of those wants ought to be fulfilled. Needs assessments lack a principled basis for carrying out their strategies. Without this basis, they cannot determine defensible

educational objectives. One purpose of needs assessments is to determine what ought to be done in education. Yet this purpose cannot be achieved if wants are the only things taken into consideration. People can, and often do, want immoral things. The community wants the schools to be racially segregated; but what it wants may well be unjust and unlawful.

Considering preferences will not help, for preferences merely prioritize or rank wants. A procedure which considers preferences not only fails to provide principles for determining which, if any, of the wants ought to be fulfilled, it also fails to provide principles for determining which, if any, of the preferences ought to be fulfilled. These failures defeat the very purpose of needs assessments. If needs assessments still leave unanswered the question, "Which needs ought to be fulfilled?", then they fail to achieve the very purpose for which they were designed.

Part B

In this part of the essay, we argue that the current method of needs assessment should incorporate two formal and two heuristic rules of universalizability. The general insight underlying these rules if this: To judge that in a particular situation it would be morally right (or wrong) for an agent to perform a particular action, is to imply that one would judge that in any other relevantly similar situation, it is morally right (or wrong) for such an agent to perform a similar action. In other words, moral judgments are universalizable. Some noted theorists have argued that the four rules of universalizability are logical or semantic features of moral reasoning and discourse. As we shall see, however, only two of the rules are related to moral reasoning in this way.

When we set out to consider ways of modifying the method of needs assessment, we did so in order to help it reach conclusions which were

ethically justifiable. It seemed clear that the four rules of universalizability would guarantee that the educator drew an evaluative conclusion on the basis of moral reasoning. Given that the rules were presented as formal or logical in nature and not as substantive moral rules, it seemed that all people engaged in moral reasoning, whatever their moral outlooks, could accept them as guides. For the rules do not exclude, a priori, any set of interests or ideals.

If following the rules of universalizability would guarantee moral reasoning, it would be theoretically important and practically feasible to incorporate them into needs assessments. Indeed, given the prominence of universalizability in the work of modern moral philosophers, such as R. M. Hare (1965) and J. Rawls (1971), our efforts seemed likely to succeed. But we shall argue that although the rules ought to be incorporated into the method in certain ways, their incorporation cannot guarantee that the reasoning is moral.

Although it is often claimed that the rules are formal, we shall argue that two of them are substantive. The substantive rules should not be viewed as tests for the acceptability of criteria for making moral judgments; instead, they should be viewed as devices for increasing one's awareness and understanding of the other people involved in the evaluation.

The following is a description of the first kind of universalizability:

> In a particular situation, one's judging that
> "Agent A ought to do Act X" is universalizable
> means that in making the singular judgment
> (Agent A ought to do Act X) in the situation one
> is, either implicitly or explicitly, following

RULE OF UNIVERSALIZABILITY$_1$ (Rule U_1):

WHENEVER THE FEATURES PRESENT IN A SITUATION SATISFY CRITERIA FOR JUDGING THAT AGENT A OUGHT TO DO ACT X, MAKE THE JUDGMENT.

Rule U_1 is part of an analysis of what it is for one's judging to be universalizable. The intuition underlying this analysis is that one's judging is universalizable if one is judging consistently. Whenever a person makes a judgment because he recognizes the presence of certain features in a situation, the person uses those features as criteria for making the judgment. Once the person adopts certain features as criteria for making a judgment, he is committed to using those features as criteria for making a judgment whenever he recognizes, either implicitly or explicitly, that those features are present in a situation. Failing to make the judgment about a situation in which one recognizes the criteria are satisfied, leaves one open to the charge of judging inconsistently. Rule U_1 is simply a rule to the effect that reasoning and judging be consistent (Locke, 1968; Monro, 1967).

Reasoning consistently is necessary for reasoning correctly, but insufficient. To judge consistently is merely to follow the same rules either implicitly or explicitly, in making judgments. But one can follow the same rules in judging, and so judge consistently, without necessarily following the correct rules, and so without judging correctly. If the criteria are incorrect, the judgment itself may be incorrect. Following Rule U_1 does not guarantee that one is aware of or using correct criteria.

Rule U_1 is morally neutral because it is a purely formal rule. In fact, it is common to many kinds of reasoning, and so will not serve to differentiate moral reasoning from non-moral reasoning. Even though Rule U_1 does not mark

off moral from non-moral reasoning, we believe that it should be incorporated into the needs assessment method so as to remind evaluators and participants of their commitment to standards of rationality. Evaluating should not be an unreasoned activity relying solely on feelings or inclinations. Evaluators and participants should strive to clarify the criteria and rules used in evaluation. If they use the language of "ought," if they are making judgments about what ought to be done, they are indeed committed to following certain rules.

The second kind of universalizability may be described as follows:

> In a particular situation, one's judging that "Agent A ought to do Act X" is universalizable means that in making the singular judgment (Agent A ought to do Act X) in the situation one is, either implicitly or explicitly, following
>
> RULE OF UNIVERSALIZABILITY$_2$ (Rule U_2)
>
> WHENEVER THE FEATURES PRESENT IN A SITUATION SATISFY CRITERIA FOR JUDGING THAT AGENT A OUGHT TO DO ACT X, MAKE THE JUDGMENT, ONLY IF THE CRITERIA ARE RELEVANT.

Rule U_2 is part of an analysis of the second kind of universalizability. The intuition underlying this analysis is that one's judging is universalizable only if one is using criteria relevant to one's judgment.

Not everything counts as a reason for making a moral judgment. The presence of some features in a situation will be relevant to judging that Agent A ought to do Act X; the presence of other features will be irrelevant. In other words, some features of a situation will not be morally relevant.

Rule U_2, however, is a purely formal rule and, as such, is morally neutral. In reasoning about a subject matter, one's reasons must be relevant to the subject matter. They must have something to do with it. Since Rule U_2 does not specify what the relevant criteria are for making moral judgments, it will not differentiate moral reasoning from non-moral reasoning, nor will it distinguish moral from immoral judgments.

The following is a description of the third kind of universalizability:

> In a particular situation, one's judging that "Agent A ought to do Act X" is universalizable means that in making the singular judgment (Agent A ought to do Act X) in the situation one is, either implicitly or explicitly, following RULE OF UNIVERSALIZABILITY$_3$ (Rule U_3):
>
> WHENEVER THE FEATURES PRESENT IN A SITUATION SATISFY CRITERIA FOR JUDGING THAT AGENT A OUGHT TO DO ACT X, MAKE THE JUDGMENT, ONLY IF ONE ACCEPTS THE CRITERIA AS RELEVANT AND ONE WOULD ACCEPT THE CRITERIA AS RELEVANT IF ONE WERE IN THE POSITION OF THOSE WHO DIFFER FROM ONESELF IN MENTAL ABILITIES, PHYSICAL QUALITIES AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS.

As we have seen, reasoning governed by Rule U_1 only ensures a kind of consistency. Such reasoning is not constrained by any particular content. Reasoning governed by Rule U_2 only guarantees relevance, but Rule U_2 does not specify what the relevant criteria are. Rule U_3 limits the sorts of criteria one may use in making a moral judgment to those one not only accepts as relevant, but would accept as relevant if one

were in the position of those who differ from oneself in mental abilities, physical qualities and socioeconomic status. The intuition underlying this rule is that one's acceptance of criteria as morally relevant should not favor one's own mental abilities, physical qualities and socioeconomic status. It is a heuristic device for discovering whether your acceptance of the criteria is based on such considerations. As a heuristic device, Rule U_3 has the added advantage of increasing our understanding of people who differ from ourselves.

Some writers have maintained that the third kind of universalizability is a formal or logical feature of moral reasoning -- that Rule U_3 could be used as a logical test for the admissibility of rules or maxims into moral discourse. Rule U_3, however, is not a purely formal rule. It is a substantive moral rule. It quite nicely expresses our intuitions that one's own mental abilities, physical qualities and socioeconomic status should not be favored in determining which criteria are morally relevant.

We recommend that Rule U_3 be incorporated into needs assessment as a heuristic means of gaining greater awareness and understanding of ourselves and of persons who differ from ourselves with respect to these characteristics. Until it is shown that Rule U_3 is substantively correct, however, we do not recommend that it be used as a test for the admissibility of criteria for making moral judgments.

The fourth kind of universalizability may be stated the following way:

> In a particular situation, one's judging that
> "Agent A ought to do Act X" is universalizable
> means that in making the singular judgment
> (Agent A ought to do Act X) in the situation one
> is, either implicitly or explicitly, following

RULE OF UNIVERSALIZABILITY$_4$ (Rule U_4):

WHENEVER THE FEATURES PRESENT IN A SITUATION SATISFY CRITERIA FOR JUDGING THAT AGENT A OUGHT TO DO ACT X, MAKE THE JUDGMENT ONLY IF ONE ACCEPTS THE CRITERIA AS RELEVANT AND ONE WOULD ACCEPT THE CRITERIA AS RELEVANT IF ONE WERE IN THE POSITION OF THOSE WHO DIFFER FROM ONESELF IN MENTAL ABILITIES, PHYSICAL QUALITIES, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, DESIRES, TASTES, PREFERENCES, VALUES AND IDEALS.

As we have seen, Rule U_1 imposes requirements of consistency in reasoning, while Rule U_2 imposes requirements of both consistency and relevance. Rule U_3 imposes limitations of acceptability on what count as relevant criteria, and Rule U_4 imposes additional limitations.

A few writers have maintained that the fourth kind of universalizability is a formal or logical characteristic of moral reasoning. Given that Rule U_4 further limits the sorts of criteria one may use in making a moral judgment to those one would accept as relevant if one were in the position of those who also differ from oneself in desires, tastes, preferences, values and ideals, Rule U_4 clearly is not a formal or logical feature of moral reasoning. It is a substantive moral rule.

The intuition underlying Rule U_3 is that one's acceptance of criteria as morally relevant should not favor one's own mental abilities, physical qualities and socioeconomic status. Rule U_3 is a heuristic device to guard against this. An additional intuition underlies Rule U_4. Not only should one's acceptance of criteria as morally relevant not favor one's own desires, tastes, preferences, values and ideals, but also it should not be tied to

desires, tastes, preferences, values and ideals which one has failed to reflect upon.

We recommend that Rule U_4 be incorporated into needs assessment as a heuristic means of gaining greater awareness and understanding of ourselves and of persons who differ from ourselves with respect to these additional characteristics. Until it is shown that Rule U_4 is substantively correct, however, we do not recommend that it be used as a test for the admissibility of criteria for making moral judgments.

We are recommending that needs assessments incorporate into their methodology devices for fostering an intuitive understanding and awareness of others. Our hope is that incorporating such devices in needs assessments will bring about these results. It is important to realize, however, that allowing these rules to be part of one's reasoning does not commit one to accepting or endorsing the criteria others use in making moral judgments. It merely requires that others be taken seriously. It provides for a kind of concern, a kind of respect for others, but does not require a positive endorsement of their values and ideals.

Conclusion

We have argued that the current needs assessment method cannot serve the purpose for which it was designed. At best, needs assessments yield a survey of wants or preferences, and a survey of wants cannot disclose what ought to be done in education. We have proposed that four rules of universalizability be incorporated in the needs assessment method so that well-reasoned judgments, rather than arbitrary ones, would result from needs assessments. We realize that following these four rules will not guarantee that needs assessment participants will draw the morally correct conclusions. However, evaluators will be taking a step in the right

direction if their enterprise fosters a rational consideration of educational goals and programs.

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